

VIETNAM WAR

VIETNAM WAR began in 1957 when forces supported by Communist North Vietnam began attacking the government and its officials in South Vietnam. For the first few years, these forces consisted of guerrillas and terrorists commonly called the *Viet Cong* or *VC*. Viet Cong is a shortened form of the words *Viet Congsan*, meaning *Vietnamese Communists*. Most of the Viet Cong's officers had been trained in North Vietnam and had later been sent secretly back into South Vietnam.

The Viet Cong were opposed by the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN). The ARVN received military and economic aid from the United States, including assistance from American advisers. In 1965, combat units of the U.S. Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, and Coast Guard began to take part. Smaller units were sent from South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and Thailand. On the Communist side, the Viet Cong were joined by regular units of the North Vietnam People's Army (PAVN). Russia and China supplied the Communists with war materials but not troops.

The Communists called the struggle in Vietnam a *war of national liberation*. They accused the South Vietnamese government of being a "puppet" of the United States and pledged to overthrow the government. They wanted to unite Vietnam under one rule.

The fighting in South Vietnam started on a small scale. In time, it grew into a savage, full-scale war that threatened world peace. There was no fixed *front* (battle line). The Communists used guerrilla tactics, including ambushes and hand-laid bombs and mines (see *GUERRILLA WARFARE*). Non-Communist forces conducted air raids and "search and destroy" operations in which troops were transported by helicopters.

The United States never officially declared war. But the number of American troops in South Vietnam reached a peak of more than 543,000 in February, 1969. At the same time, there were more than 800,000 South Vietnamese and about 68,000 other non-Communist forces fighting an estimated 240,000 Communist guerrillas and regular troops. About 82,000 of the Communist forces were regular PAVN soldiers. Later in 1969, the United States began limited troop withdrawals. American withdrawals continued during the early 1970's, and the South Vietnamese began to take more responsibility in carrying on the war. In January, 1973, a cease-fire agreement was signed by the United States, North and South Vietnam, and the Viet Cong. The cease-fire ended U.S. involvement in the war. However, North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the Viet Cong violated the agreement and continued to fight. The war ended on April 30, 1975, when South Vietnam surrendered to the Communists.

The United States and the War

U.S. participation in the Vietnam War became one of the most divisive foreign policy issues in United States history. Americans disagreed on both the objectives and the strategy of U.S. involvement. The war became increasingly unpopular as casualties increased and chances for victory appeared to decrease. See JOHNSON, LYNDON B. (*The Widening Vietnam War*); NIXON, RICHARD M. (*Foreign Policy; Foreign Affairs*).

Some Americans believed U.S. participation was

necessary to stop Communist aggression and to maintain U.S. honor and prestige. They argued that a Communist victory in South Vietnam would lead to Communist take-overs elsewhere. Some government leaders believed that the loss of South Vietnam to the Communists would mean all of Southeast Asia would fall to Communism "like a set of dominoes."

Other Americans believed that the conflict in Vietnam was a civil war in which the United States should not have become involved. Some maintained that U.S. security was not at stake and that the nation should not try to be a "world policeman." Others claimed that the U.S. armed forces were supporting a corrupt, undemocratic government in South Vietnam, and that the war was draining money away from vital U.S. domestic programs. Still others opposed the war because it resulted in hundreds of thousands of military and civilian casualties and left large areas of Vietnam in ruin.

Some military experts called for more U.S. military pressure. They argued that the Communists would give in only if the war were carried to North Vietnam by bombing or other means. Others disagreed, and wanted



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History of the War

The Viet Cong Raids began in early 1957. Guerrillas began to attack farm villages, particularly in the Mekong Delta. The Viet Cong guerrillas were under Communist control, but many of them were not Communist Party members. They fought against the South Vietnamese government because of its repressive measures and its failure to provide the people with the necessities of life. Some of the toughest Viet Cong had been fighting for about 20 years, first against Japan, then France, and finally against the Diem government.

By 1960, the Viet Cong had about 20,000 men. They were outnumbered by the South Vietnamese Army ten to one, but were strong enough to attack South Vietnamese forts and army units. They used guerrilla tactics, striking here and there unexpectedly. South Vietnamese troops tried to protect the entire country but failed.

The National Liberation Front (NLF), a political group, was organized in Hanoi in December, 1960, to support the Viet Cong. The NLF set up local councils to govern areas of South Vietnam controlled by the Viet Cong, built factories to manufacture weapons, and supplied ammunition, medical supplies, and money to the Viet Cong. Many of the VC's supplies and troops came from North Vietnam, chiefly over a system of roads and trails known as the *Ho Chi Minh Trail*.

By 1961, the Viet Cong had become so successful in South Vietnam that the U.S. was forced to choose between allowing the collapse of the South Vietnamese government and increasing its support. At that time, the United States had about 750 military advisers in South Vietnam. President John F. Kennedy ordered a step-up in military aid, including the increase of American advisers, technicians, pilots, and planes. By February, 1962, about 2,700 U.S. advisers had arrived. By November, 1963—when Kennedy was assassinated—there were about 16,300 U.S. military men in South Vietnam.

The Buddhist Crisis in 1963 heightened South Vietnam's internal troubles. The Buddhists claimed that Diem, a Roman Catholic, was treating them unjustly because of their religious beliefs. Some Buddhist monks burned themselves to death as a sign of protest. When special forces under Nhu raided and wrecked some Buddhist *pagodas* (temples), dissatisfaction with the Diem government spread. The United States criticized the Diem government and suspended certain types of economic aid to South Vietnam.

The South Vietnamese generals, encouraged by United States disapproval of Nhu's action, overthrew the Diem government on Nov. 1, 1963. Diem and his brother Nhu were killed the next day. A series of short-lived regimes governed South Vietnam until a military *junta* (committee) headed by Air Force Commander Nguyen Cao Ky came to power in June, 1965.

IMPORTANT DATES IN THE VIETNAM WAR

- 1957** The Viet Cong began to attack the South Vietnamese government headed by President Ngo Dinh Diem.
- 1963 (June)** Buddhists in South Vietnam began large-scale demonstrations against the Diem government.
- 1963 (Nov. 1)** South Vietnamese generals overthrew the Diem government, and Diem was killed the next day.
- 1964 (Aug. 7)** The U.S. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which gave the President power "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."
- 1965 (Feb. 7)** President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered U.S. pilots to bomb military targets in North Vietnam.
- 1965 (March 6)** President Johnson sent U.S. Marines to Da Nang, South Vietnam, to protect American bases there. The Marines were the first U.S. ground troops in the war.
- 1967 (Sept. 3)** South Vietnam held the first elections under its new constitution, adopted earlier that year. Nguyen Van Thieu was elected president.
- 1968 (Jan. 30)** The Communists launched the Tet offensive, a large-scale attack against 30 South Vietnamese cities.
- 1968 (March 16)** U.S. troops killed hundreds of South Vietnamese civilians in the village of My Lai. One officer, Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., was found guilty of murder by a U.S. court-martial.
- 1968 (May 13)** Preliminary peace talks between the United States and North Vietnam began in Paris.
- 1969 (June 8)** President Richard M. Nixon announced that U.S. troops would begin to withdraw from South Vietnam.
- 1970 (June 24)** The Senate repealed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution.
- 1973 (Jan. 27)** The United States, North and South Vietnam, and the Viet Cong signed a cease-fire agreement in Paris.
- 1973 (March 29)** The last American troops left South Vietnam.
- 1975 (April 21)** President Thieu resigned.
- 1975 (April 30)** South Vietnam surrendered to the Communists.

The Gulf of Tonkin Incident. On July 30, 1964, South Vietnamese naval craft raided islands in the Gulf of Tonkin north of the 17th parallel. Two U.S. destroyers were patrolling nearby. North Vietnamese PT boats, probably while pursuing the South Vietnamese, attacked the destroyers. Two PT boats were sunk. U.S. planes then bombed the PT boat bases. This was the first U.S. attack on North Vietnamese territory.

After the Tonkin Gulf incident, President Lyndon B. Johnson asked Congress for powers "to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." Congress granted these powers by an overwhelming vote. Johnson used the resolution as a chief legal basis of U.S. support for South Vietnam in the war.

Escalation of the War. The war gradually grew in intensity. In late 1964, South Vietnamese morale was extremely low, and the United States began to consider bombing North Vietnam as a way of assisting. An attack on two U.S. camps at Pleiku in early 1965 triggered the decision. U.S. and South Vietnamese pilots then began bombing the infiltration routes and military installations in North Vietnam. For many years, the North Vietnamese had sent mostly former Southerners into South Vietnam. In late 1964, however, at least one North Vietnamese battalion was sent to South Vietnam. In midspring of 1965, following the bombing of North Vietnam, large numbers of North Vietnamese troops began arriving in South Vietnam.

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